

HUMAN NATURE: THE GENESIS VIEW

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1979.

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The basic human problem, as I see it, is alienation. We humans are alienated from God. We are alienated from other people, from each other. We are alienated from the natural world in which we live. We are even alienated from ourselves, from our own bodies. Thus the great human need is reconciliation, and this is what the salvation drama recorded in the Bible is all about - God acting to reconcile us to God, to each other, to the natural world, to our own selves.

To understand this, we need to look at the Biblical view of human nature. The basic Biblical affirmation about human nature, as I see it, is that the human being is a creature made in the image of God, but yet is a sinner.

First, the human being is a creature. The two creation accounts in Genesis 1 - 3 both state in so many words that the human being is a creature. Like everything else in the universe, animate and inanimate, the human being is created by God. What does this mean? The human being is part of God's earthly creation, part of the created world, and thus the human is a finite and mortal being. The human is immersed in nature and has many of the same limits that the rest of created life has. We humans require air, water, and food to sustain ourselves. We are driven by impulses and "instincts" to insure the survival of ourselves and our species. Our existence on the earth is limited to a short span of years. In short, the human is finite, dependent, and mortal. The human is one of the animals of God's creation.

Yet the human is also something else. Despite physical limitations, the human is also a spiritual being. Human beings can stand outside of themselves and of the world in which they live. Humans are somehow different from the rest of the creation, different even from fellow mammals. Christian thought which is rooted in the Bible has always recognized and affirmed that the human has a distinctive place in God's creation. All of life is related to and is dependent upon God, but we humans alone have a choice as to what our relationship with God will be. The human is the only creature, so far as we know, that can turn away from God and thus the only one that can turn to God. Because we humans have spiritual freedom, we can enter into a special relationship with God that other animals cannot, and we can also allow ourselves to be totally cut off and destroyed.

This brings us to our second Biblical statement about human nature, that the human being is made in the image of God. The Biblical tradition affirms several times that God created humanity in God's own image.

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'. So God created humankind in God's own image. In the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them..." (Genesis 1:26-27).

"This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created humankind, God made them in the likeness of God. Male and female God created them, and God blessed them and named them Humankind when they were created" (Genesis 5:1-2).

"Whoever sheds human blood, by the hands of humans shall that person's blood be shed; for God made humankind in God's own image" (Genesis 9:6).

"For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue - a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Creator, and with it we curse people, who are made in the likeness of God" (James 3:7-9).

So human beings are created in the image or likeness of God. No other creature has this God-likeness as part of its being. The human is something special in God's creation. Throughout Judeo-Christian history, there have been many discussions as to what this "image of God" means. What does it mean to state that the human is created in the image of God?

To answer this question we must first ask ourselves: what is it in or about the human being that is Godly or which reflects God? Also we must realize that whatever this "image of God" is, it refers to the whole person and not to some part or aspect of us. If God created the human in God's own image, then it is the total human being which is the God-likeness. For this reason I cannot accept most of the theological ideas which have been proposed to explain the image. The image of God is not some quality or faculty in the human which can be viewed in separation from other qualities and faculties. Neither is it some immortal or eternal aspect that the human naturally possesses, like a soul or a mind as distinct and separate from the rest of the body. Rather the total human being is created in the image of God.

Two Christian thinkers who have stimulated my thinking in this matter are Reinhold Niebuhr and Gordon Kaufman. Niebuhr's two-volume work The Nature and Destiny of Man is, in my opinion, one of the most perceptive and insightful books that Christianity has yet produced. Kaufman's Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective has also greatly influenced me and expanded my understanding of God and of human nature. These books are not easy reading; there is some "heavy" theological reflection in them, but they are extremely worthwhile.

Briefly, Niebuhr regards the image of God as the ability of the human for self-transcendence. We humans can stand outside of ourselves and look at ourselves. We can stand back and look at our life, at our reasoning, at our decisions, at our growth, etc. We can even stand outside of nature and the world and look at them objectively. We can view everything in the created world as a spectator as well as a participant. Because of this capacity for self-transcendence, we humans can look beyond ourselves and beyond all of the created order to ultimate reality, to that which is finally and absolutely real. Because of our capacity for self-transcendence, it is impossible for us humans to find our source and meaning in either nature or history. We must find our source and meaning in ultimate reality or we do not find it at all. Because we can stand outside of ourselves, nature, and history, and see beyond them, we must look beyond them to find our source and meaning.

Kaufman, very briefly, thinks that the historicalness or "historicity" of the human is what defines the image of God. The human has been created in ongoing history, is shaped into a historical being, is able to create culture and further history, and is thus capable of free and creative responsiveness to the primordial historical being, namely God. The human is in a sense made by history, but the human

also makes history. We humans have been formed by the decisions we have made, by the relationships in which we have been involved, and indeed by the whole human past. Yet we alone decide what to do with this being of ours which has been so created and formed. It is this historicity which most sharply distinguishes the human from other animals. No other being can deliberately shape history as well as be shaped by it. No other being can decide something and then take responsibility for it.

Note that when the Genesis 1 account speaks of God creating humankind in God's own image, the words that immediately follow are: "and let them have dominion over" the fish, birds, cattle, and everything else. God's blessing over them was: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God created humans to work in God's world, as laborers together with God, to be God's fellow workers, God's partners. We are co-creators with God in the historical process in which God is creating the Kingdom. God created humans to be historical like God and to shape world history through creative activity.

Niebuhr and Kaufman each emphasize a different aspect of God in which they perceive human likeness. Each has his own idea of how humans are made in the image of God. Niebuhr stresses human self-transcendence and says that we are like God in that we can transcend both ourselves and our environment. Kaufman underscores historicity and says that we are like God in that we are historical beings. Both of these ideas have some truth in them, I think.

To say that humans are created in the image of God means that we can mirror or reflect God. We are able to respond to the will of God for our life. This is possible because of our self-transcendent perspective. Because we can look beyond the world, nature, and history, and thus in some sense be a master over the world, nature, and history, we know that ultimate meaning is not to be found here. We are able to acknowledge the Reality which is behind it all. As a result of this image or likeness of God in our very human make-up, God can make contact with us. God can reveal Godself to us humans and be, at least in part, perceived. Because God created humans thus, God made possible a new kind of creature-Creator relationship.

This, however, is not the whole picture of human nature. We are creatures made in the image of God, and thus able to reflect God and respond to God, but the Bible also says something else. The third point about human nature is that the human being is a sinner. It is really tragic, in my opinion, that today this Biblical insight is either distorted all out of proportion, making humans evil, miserable scoundrels, crawling in the slime, not capable of doing anything good or worthwhile; or going to the other extreme, forgetting all about sin and believing that humans are basically fine, that there is nothing inherently wrong with the world or with human behavior as presently constituted. In this latter view, everybody should just do their own thing, and everything will be fine.

Unless we have a balanced view of human nature and a realistic understanding of human sinfulness, we are constantly going to misjudge other people and human institutions. Those people who operate as if all there is is sin do not tap into the innate image of God in those with whom they deal. Those people who do not take sinfulness into account are time and time again frustrated and disappointed. A balanced and realistic understanding of human nature is important.

To say that all of us humans are inherently sinful does not mean that we are basically bad or evil. It obviously does not mean that we are basically good either. I do not think that deep down inside we are good or bad; we have the potential for both. What we are deep down inside is sinful, and by that I mean separated, cut off, alienated. Even those of us who have accepted Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior and who thus have a new relationship with God still live most of our life as if we were separate from God.

One of the insights of the first creation story in Genesis 1 is that the world is good. God's creation is good, and that includes humankind. The text is very clear: God looked upon everything that God made, and it was good. The world was created by a good God to carry out God's purposes. This means that nothing in all existence should be regarded as evil in itself. God's creation is good; everything has been brought into being for God's purposes. But something has gone wrong. The world, and the human race in particular, has "screwed up". Something happened to God's good creation.

The Hebrew way of expressing what went wrong was to tell a story. In Genesis 2 - 3 we have a story that uses mythical language and concepts. Now by "mythical", I do not mean untrue, false, or misleading. Myth means symbolic language and it explains not how things historically happened, but why things happened as they did, how did we get to our present situation, what is the meaning of what happened, why are we like the way we are now. Adam and Eve are representatives of our ancestors, the first humans or the original humanity. Their story is not limited to the first generation of humankind; it is true for all generations. The story of Adam and Eve is true in that it speaks of the condition of all people. Their story is true in explaining how God created the world and how we humans perverted it.

I do not have space in this paper to go into the details of the story in Genesis 2 - 3, but I do want to point out that most of what is commonly heard about Adam and Eve is a distortion of the real content of this story. It is actually a very insightful and challenging account. It is not sexist and it does not give license for male supremacy, as it has often been interpreted. In fact it is a feminist story, and it is pro-sexuality and pro-ecology as well. For further information on this, I refer you to my article "Adam and Eve: A Story For All Time". I also recommend Phyllis Trible's book God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Fortress Press, 1978).

Adam and Eve, the primordial human beings, tried to usurp the authority of God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Part of what it means to be sinful is to attempt to define right and wrong without reference to God. It is human attempt to order life, make choices, and to determine what is the right course without God. It is God's will alone that determines what is right and wrong, and what is good and evil. In other words, Adam and Eve tried to be "God" for themselves, to be their own moral authority. This is why their relationship with God was severed, and this is why everything else in human life became so distorted, because they tried to make it on their own without acknowledging their Creator, the one in whom is their source and their destiny.

The results of their disobedience are found in Chapter 3 of Genesis, in what is commonly called the curses. These judgments are commentaries on the disastrous effects of their shared disobedience.

These judgments show how terrible and distorted human life has become. We misunderstand if we take these judgments to be mandates or commands from God. These verses describe the human situation that results from sin; they do not prescribe proper, right human behavior. This sinfulness affects all relationships: between animals and human beings, between humans and their own bodies, between man and woman, between humans and the soil, and between humans and their labor. Whereas in creation man and woman know harmony and equality, in sin they experience alienation and discord. Everything is "screwed up". They are ejected from their earthly paradise, and from then on live a life of frustration, pain, and strife.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil stands throughout human history as a constant temptation to people. Humans are always trying to order their lives and determine what is best for themselves without reference to God. These attempts always distort life, but humans keep trying. Chapters 4 through 11 of Genesis tell the subsequent history of humankind also in mythic terms. Everything is perverted. Things go from bad to worse. The alienation that humans feel causes hatred and murder, refusal to listen to God, and attempts to build up power and prestige. Sin is the separation from God that subsequently distorts all of life.

The second creation story in Genesis 2 - 3 clearly shows that God did not create the world so that there would be alienation, domination, sexism, frustration, pain, etc. These are things that human beings have brought upon themselves. These are "demonic" forces that enslave humans, hold them down, and from which they need to be released. The intention of God for creation is harmony: among humans, between humans and the rest of creation, and within human nature itself. All of this, however, has been warped and distorted by the willful rebellion of humans.

This sets the stage for all the rest of the Biblical drama that follows. The "fall" of humanity from God's original purposes and then God's continuing efforts to restore these purposes is basic to understanding everything else in the Bible. The story of Adam and Eve is the Prologue to the whole Biblical story.

The understanding of human nature as articulated in Genesis 1 - 3 is part of the required raw material for doing Christian theology and ethics. In brief, that understanding is that the human being is a creature made in the image of God, but yet is a sinner.

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Box 2 Erikson's Eight Ages of Man

Erikson identifies eight central psychodynamic issues that each person must resolve sequentially. Each issue is viewed as having either an adaptive or a neurotic resolution which affects adaptation to subsequent life stages. Five of these eight stages occur in childhood or adolescence; only three are identified for the later years. These stages are defined by the central issues of concern rather than by a clear age parameter.

1. *Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust*: In early infancy, children gain security and trust in the world through having their physical needs met lovingly. This early experience develops a positive trust in the goodness of the world. Without such early security, a baby emerges from infancy with a basic mistrust of the social environment.
2. *Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt*: Beyond the first year of life, the baby can either be encouraged to take control of her or his anal functions, or toilet training can occur in a coercive atmosphere that encourages shame and doubt of one's own capacities.
3. *Initiative vs. Guilt*: The oedipal period (around age 3-5) becomes the background for the development of independent actions as the child seeks to establish gender identification. The child's feelings towards her or his parents at this age can be accepted, or the parents may reject these expressions and make the child feel guilty of them.
4. *Industry vs. Inferiority*: During the early school years that make up the latency period (ages 6-12) the child can invest much energy in learning, if the social environment supports her or his efforts toward competence. On the other hand, a child in an overly critical, demanding environment will emerge with feelings of inferiority about her or his capabilities.
5. *Identity vs. Role Confusion*: During adolescence, the child grapples with the establishment of an identity independent of her or his parents. If such efforts are thwarted by the parents, the child emerges into adulthood without having clarified personal values or goals for the future.
6. *Intimacy vs. Isolation*: The urge to establish meaningful bonds with others becomes central during young adulthood. If one cannot achieve true intimacy and sharing at this time, future relationships will be superficial.
7. *Generativity vs. Stagnation*: Between young adulthood and old age, a person's major energies are directed toward full engagement in major life roles. A feeling of successful contribution is necessary for adjustment during this central adult period. Without the reward of feeling productive, a person experiences stagnation.
8. *Integrity vs. Despair*: In old age, awareness of approaching death leads to a search for the meaning of one's life. If the aged can view their past experiences with pride and satisfaction, they can face the end of their life with acceptance. If they regret their choices and involvements, they will feel a pervasive sense of disillusionment and failure.

